

The Summer of 1877

For three months the members of the Nez Perce non-treaty bands had been constantly on the move evading the military. Scouts ranged in front and guarded behind the traveling village of mostly children, women and old people, as they sought safety and the hope of peace in Canada with Sitting Bull's band of Sioux. Guided for a time by a white miner captured at Yellowstone Lake, the Nez Perce now followed an obscure path over the Absaroka divide.

When General Howard's command passed through Cooke City, they found miners barricaded and ready to repulse an attack. But the Nez Perce had by-passed the area, traveling along a drainage south of here. The Army then proceeded over Colter Pass and found the abandoned Nez Perce camp at Crandall Creek. From here history swept Nez Perce and army troops across the Yellowstone River and north to the Bear Paws Mountains and the final battle of the war.

Passing through rough terrain

The Army had a difficult time tracking the Nez Perce through this country. Which way to go? The Indians might be traveling through the Wind River, Stinking Water River, or the Clark's Fork out of Yellowstone Park. Colonel Sturgis' 7th Cavalry was maneuvering to cut them off before they emerged from the mountains, while General Howard's command doggedly kept up the push from behind. The army scouts had been killed, breaking communication between the two commands and adding to the confusion.

The Absaroka divide was some of the toughest country the army had yet to cross. Relentlessly climbing by day, their blankets whipped off by the freezing wind at night, many of the soldiers thought they were not going to make it.

It was an even more remarkable journey over this very rugged terrain for the Nez Perce. Not only did they face the same hardships of cold and the physically demanding trail, but they were also able to successfully hide the passing of 800 people and 3,000 horses for almost 85 miles.

